

Using Social Media to Prosper in 2009

With more than 3 million Facebook fans, over 1 million MySpace friends, huge presences on sites like Flickr, YouTube, LinkedIn, and even Twitter, the Obama campaign took social media into new territory. Obama's success has been one of the more recent and visible reminders that social media represent an outstanding and still largely untapped opportunity, especially for LOHAS organizations. The Obama team helped organize an unprecedented grassroots campaign for the presidency through these media, not only reaching so many millions of people, but interacting with huge numbers of them as well.

Why Socialize Online

Not only political campaigns but for-profit companies and nonprofits are also starting to get some real traction with social media. Moreover, social media users often connect to a brand or a cause in the social media universe as an expression of their online identities. So LOHAS organizations have an advantage here.

For example, Ben & Jerry's has over 420,000 "fans" on Facebook, most of them acquired in 2008, with a very active page that includes a video contest, a quiz, and hundreds of posts from its fans. The tools Facebook and its application partners provide allow for lots of ways for B&J's to achieve organizational objectives, including brand monitoring, brand building, and R&D, as well as lead generation and even direct sales.

There are very large and increasing numbers of people now spending more time than ever online, both at work and at home, with social media getting an increasing lion's share of their attention and time. Hundreds of millions of online users have already joined at least one social

media service, with many subscribing to more than one. Participation in social media continues to grow, as more people seek to connect, share, and collaborate with sometimes far-flung family, friends, business colleagues, and other like-minded individuals online.

Moreover, many thought leaders of the LOHAS crowd have taken the lead in using social media. Therefore, the social media universe is already very influential.

People, and particularly those in the LOHAS crowd, want to help improve their world. They want to do so through both their work and personal lives and increasingly through their consumption, investing, and civic activities, as well as through donations and volunteerism. They look to research, organize, and have conversations with others about accomplishing these things—all activities that social media have helped greatly facilitate. LOHASians are quickly coming to expect the brands with whom they do business to do the same.

For LOHAS marketers, social media represent a potentially more personable way to communicate with LOHAS consumers and those open to learning more about LOHAS

issues. Those users can be found across a wide variety of social media, including both general interest and vertically focused media that connect people specifically interested in issues of sustainability and social responsibility.

How to Join the Online Party

"OK," you're saying now, "I understand and am sold on the idea that using social media is something I should be getting serious about in 2009. So what do I do?"

Here are some key tips:

If you or your staff are not already well-versed in using social media for organizational objectives, start slowly or hire a consultant or agency that is. It's important to consider carefully what your objectives are and the pitfalls and benefits of using different types of social media to help achieve them. **Some of the keys are authenticity, genuine participation, and giving (rather than seeking just another venue to sell and receive).** Then get your feet wet with one or two projects.

Use social media to monitor your

brand. This is a no-brainer because it requires only listening to the conversations occurring about you in the social media universe—exactly the kind of feedback you want, and it's freely available. One very simple way to do this is to sign up for Google Alerts, which are updates on changes to blogs and websites on given key words. Set up an alert for your organization's name and/or brand, and you'll get some insight into what is being discussed about you. You can do the same for competitors, too! Another simple way is to use Twitter Search to find discussions about you in Twitter's massive microblog world or Technorati for the rest of the blogosphere.

Use social media to maintain and defend your brand. This builds on number two above. If you come across incorrect, biased, or other content that is potentially harmful to your brand, you can respond to correct it, provide more balance, and/or give reasons why a potentially negative situation is the way it is and what your organization is doing to address it. The key here is to not sound defensive or "strike back" but to respond constructively in a way that is factually accurate and builds credibility, transparency, authenticity and, of course, relationships.

Pick the right social media given your objectives. There are a number of criteria for that, which include age demographics e.g., MySpace for 12 to 25 year olds, for example, and Facebook for gaining more traction with older crowds 25 to



50 year olds; robustness of social media tools; volume of participation, as opposed to number of total members; etc. For example, we recently gained a lot more traction for a client that sells carbon offsets on Facebook than WeCanSolveIt.org, even though the latter network now has over 2 million members specifically concerned about global warming. The main reasons are probably Facebook's sheer size (over 140 million total); and that Facebook members use FB frequently because so many of their friends and family are there, and because it has so many useful tools.

Once you are established on one or two social media sites with a couple of "profiles," "pages," and/or "groups," etc., make sure to participate actively and to link from those digital properties back to your website and vice versa. Think of the social media universe as one that allows you to create multiple virtual "homes," where the most like-minded people (your customers, clients, etc.) spend time and do business, and therefore you reach them where it's convenient for them.

Make sure to try integrating your marketing campaigns with your social media properties. This benefits you in two main ways. First, it allows you to potentially reach a lot more of your target audience and to do so with additional tools probably not available to you on

your own website. Second, extending your marketing efforts to online social environments helps lead to viral distribution of your marketing message. As one example, you can try a video contest that you promote on your site, to your email list, etc., as well as on YouTube, where people would then post their own responses. You may even use a winning entry for promotional use, as long as the contest is set up that way.

Assessing Social Media's Value

Here's the caveat. Social media doesn't generally translate into sales as immediately, and doesn't generally track sales as accurately, as email or search advertising, for example. Nor does it allow you to "own" (with the exception of LinkedIn), the leads you generate through an export function. But for developing and maintaining relationships – something that's becoming more critical for organizations, especially in the economic climate 2009 brings – there's hardly a better set of tools than the major social media tools now available. The relationships you develop will likely bring as much, or more, mid- and long-term value as anything else you can do, no matter the size of your organization. **U**



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